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Race and Ethnicity in American Politics
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Issue Brief: Disabled/Voting Behavior in the U.S.

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Description:

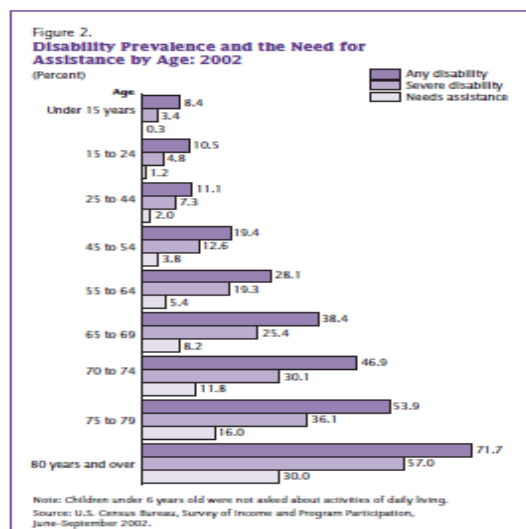
This issue brief evaluates the voting behavior of people with disabilities relative to nondisabled people and possible factors contributing to the voting gap.

Key Points:

- 1/5 of Americans have some kind of disability and around 1/10 have a severe disability
- People with disabilities are less likely than those without disabilities to vote, and less likely to be registered to vote
- Possible factors contributing to voting gap are the inability to vote secretly and independently and the inaccessibility of polling places

Issue Brief:

Accepted definitions of disability have evolved over the past 30 years. In the 1970's, disability denoted a physical or mental impairment, for example leg paralysis. Today, the definition has expanded to capture an increasingly complex and multidimensional conceptualization of disability—one that accounts for the interaction between a person and his or her environment. An individual can now be deemed disabled if he or she has a physical or mental impairment, as well as if he or she faces any environmental barriers that prevent full social participation.¹ According to this definition, around 1/5 of Americans have some kind of disability, and around 1/10 have a severe disability², which makes disabled people American's largest minority group.



The body of work devoted to political participation has largely overlooked the role disability plays in affecting voting behavior. While it is possible that previous findings on the factors that facilitate electoral participation may generalize to people with disabilities, recent studies indicate that patterns of electoral participation are significantly different between disabled and nondisabled people.

In general, these studies show that registration and voting rates among people with disabilities are well below those of nondisabled people. A 1999 survey found that, after adjusting for differences in demographic characteristics, people with

disabilities were on average about 20 percentage points less likely than those without disabilities to vote, and 10 points less likely to be registered to vote.³ Moreover, standard determinants of voting, such as age, are shown to influence disabled and nondisabled people differently. For example, as Figure 1 displays, each additional year of age for a nondisabled person is associated with an increase in the probability that this person will vote, whereas the probability that a disabled person will vote steeply declines after midlife.

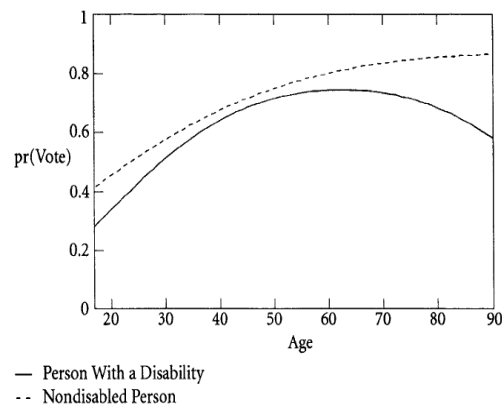


Figure 1. Effects of Age on Voter Turnout for a disabled and nondisabled person ⁴

Although there are no comprehensive studies on the factors contributing to the voting gap between people with disabilities and nondisabled people, possible determinants may be rooted in the nature of alternative voting options in place for people with disabilities.⁵ For example, many people with disabilities (particularly those with mobility and/or visual impairments) are forced to use third-party assistance when voting at the polls or in filling out absentee ballots, which denies them the ability to vote secretly and independently. Insofar as this increases the chances of encountering fraud and intimidation, the inability to vote secretly and independently may have a deterring effect on voting. Additionally, despite several federal statutory laws, including the Voting Rights Act, the Voting Accessibility for the Elderly and Handicapped Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, that mandate the accessibility of polling station, many remain inaccessible. In fact, the Federal Election Commission reports that, in violation of state and federal laws, more than 20,000 polling places across the nation are inaccessible.⁶ Non-polling place voting options, like absentee or curbside, are available; yet, many consider these options incomplete substitutes to polling place voting. Arguments supporting this perspective tend to center on the intrinsic value, or communitarian benefits, of voting in a public manner and the influence this has on decisions to enter electoral politics.⁷ Moreover, alternative voting options are often considered “cheapened” versions of polling places.

A more comprehensive study needs to be done on in order to definitively understand the determinants of the voting gap and the voting behavior of people with disabilities in general. Meanwhile, efforts toward increasing accessibility of polling places and providing voting options that ensure secrecy and independence should be increase.

References:

¹U.S. Census Bureau Data on Disability,
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disability/disability.html>

²Americans with Disabilities: 2002 Report,
<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/disability/sipp/disable05.html>

³ Independent Living Institute, <http://www.independentliving.org/docs5/disvoters.html>)

⁴ Journal of Disability Policy Studies 1998, 9:33, <http://dps.sagepub.com/content/9/2/33>

⁵ ITD Journal, <http://people.rit.edu/easi/itd/itdv10n2/watersto.htm>

⁶ The Center for an Accessible Society, <http://www.accessiblesociety.org/topics/voting/>

⁷ People with disabilities feel more isolated from their communities because of instrumental impediments and perspective issues. See 2000 N.O.D./Harris Survey of Community Participation (www.nod.org/assets/downloads/2000-executive-summary.pdf)